



# U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

## Central African Republic

### International Religious Freedom Report 2005

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

The new Constitution, which was adopted by referendum in December 2004, provides for freedom of religion while prohibiting religious fundamentalism or intolerance. The constitutional provision prohibiting religious fundamentalism was widely understood to target Muslims. The Government generally permitted adherents of all religions to worship without interference.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report.

The generally tolerant relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom. No cases of mob killings of persons suspected of practicing witchcraft were reported during the period covered by this report.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

#### Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of approximately 242,000 square miles, and its population is approximately 3.7 million, of which an estimated 690,000 live in the capital, Bangui. An estimated 50 percent of the population is Christian, approximately 15 percent is Muslim, and approximately 35 percent practices traditional indigenous religions or no religion. Most Christians also practice some aspects of traditional indigenous religions. The Government does not keep data on the number of nontraditional religious groups in the country, and there is no data available on active participation in formal religious services or rituals. There is anecdotal evidence of an increase in conversions to Islam by younger persons.

In general, immigrants and foreign nationals in the country who practice a particular religion characterize themselves as Catholic, Protestant, or Muslim.

There are many missionary groups operating in the country, including the Lutherans, Baptists, Catholics, Grace Brethren, and Jehovah's Witnesses, as well as missionaries from Nigeria, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and other African countries.

Many missionaries who left the country due to fighting from November 2002 to March 2003 between government forces and rebels, particularly in western regions, have returned to the country and resumed their activities.

#### Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

##### Legal/Policy Framework

The December 2004 Constitution provides for freedom of religion, although it prohibits what the Government considers religious fundamentalism or intolerance. The constitutional provision prohibiting religious fundamentalism was widely understood to target Muslims. The Government generally permits adherents of all religions to worship without interference. There is no state religion, and there is no indication that the Government favors any particular religion.

Contrary to past years, the Government no longer grants free air time each week on the official radio station to religious groups. All religious representatives that wish to broadcast on public airwaves must pay.

Religious groups (except for traditional indigenous religious groups) are required by law to register with the Ministry of Interior. This registration is free and confers official recognition and certain limited benefits, such as customs duty exemption for the importation of vehicles or equipment, but it does not confer a general tax exemption. The administrative police of the Ministry of Interior monitor groups that have failed to register; however, the police have not attempted to impose any penalty on such groups.

Religious organizations and missionary groups are free to proselytize, worship, and construct places of worship.

Although the Government does not explicitly prohibit religious instruction in public schools, religious instruction is not part of the overall public school curriculum. There are approximately 12 Catholic schools in Bangui.

The Government celebrates several Christian holy days as national holidays. These include Christmas, Easter Monday, Ascension Day, the Monday after Pentecost, and All Saints' Day. The Government does not officially celebrate Islamic holy days; however, Muslims are allowed to take holy days off from work.

In the past, the Government has taken positive steps to promote interfaith dialogue, including organizing interfaith masses to promote peace. President Francois Bozize was very involved in religious activities and maintained close ties with a range of religious leaders in the country.

### **Restrictions on Religious Freedom**

Any religious or nonreligious group that the Government considers subversive is subject to sanctions. The Ministry of Interior may decline to register, suspend the operations of, or ban any organization that it deems offensive to public morals or likely to disturb the peace. The Ministry of Interior also may intervene to resolve internal conflicts about property, finances, or leadership within religious groups. The Government has banned the Unification Church since the mid-1980s as a subversive organization likely to disturb the peace, specifically in connection with alleged paramilitary training of young church members. The Government imposed no new sanctions on any religious groups during the period covered by this report.

The practice of witchcraft is a criminal offense under the Penal Code; however, persons generally are prosecuted for this offense only in conjunction with some other offense, such as murder. Witchcraft traditionally has been a common explanation for diseases of which the causes were unknown. Although many traditional indigenous religions include or accommodate belief in the efficacy of witchcraft, they generally approve of harmful witchcraft only for defensive or retaliatory purposes and purport to offer protection against it. The practice of witchcraft is widely understood to encompass attempts to harm others not only by magic but also by covert means of established efficacy such as poisons.

### **Abuses of Religious Freedom**

In 2003, the Minister of Territorial Administration, in response to his stated concern over the proliferation of churches, suspended the activities of 34 Protestant churches on the allegation that they were created without consideration for official rules and regulations. This decree established preconditions for reopening the churches, including proven membership of at least 1,000 persons, evidence that the clergy had graduated from accredited religious schools, and documentation that the church was created with respect to local law. According to the Ministry of Territorial Administration, several of the churches have since fulfilled these requirements and reopened.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees.

### **Forced Religious Conversion**

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

### **Abuses by Terrorist Organizations**

There were no reported abuses targeted at specific religions by terrorist organizations during the period covered by this report.

## **Section III. Societal Attitudes**

Although in general there is religious tolerance among members of different religious groups, there have been occasional reports that some villagers who were believed to be witches were harassed, beaten, or sometimes killed by neighbors. Courts have tried, convicted, and sentenced some persons for crimes of violence against suspected witches. Contrary to past years, there were no reported mob killings of persons suspected of practicing witchcraft in recent years.

In recent years, bandits have attacked missionaries on several occasions. During the period covered by this report, there were no arrests or reports of any action taken against the perpetrators.

When serious social or political conflicts have arisen, simultaneous prayer ceremonies have been held in churches, temples, and mosques to ask for divine assistance. The Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace often conducts developmental and educational programs and seminars throughout the country. The members work closely with other church groups and social organizations on social issues. During the period covered by this report, there were several large-scale ecumenical services organized in Bangui.

**Section IV. U.S. Government Policy**

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. After a temporary suspension of operations from November 2002 through January 2005, the Embassy partially reopened with the arrival of a Charge d'Affaires and resumed the monitoring of political and human rights developments in the country.

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